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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000769

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SUBJECT: YOUTH IN TUNISIA: DREAMING ABOUT A FUTURE FAR FROM HOME

REF: TUNIS 615

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (SBU) For all the advantages Tunisia seems to offer, Tunisian youth are leaving the country at a significant rate -- both legally and illegally. A recent study revealed that 41 percent of Tunisian youth hope to leave Tunisia. They leave in search of more money, better jobs, excitement, and opportunities that are short in Tunisia. They are disproportionately affected by unemployment, with 40 percent of recent university graduates and over 50 percent of those with masters' degrees unable to find a job 18 months after finishing their studies. Increasingly disaffected, they are unsure of their place in society and uncertain of their futures in it, notwithstanding GOT efforts to hold a series of "youth dialogues" all over the country. Whether it is the best and the brightest, the privileged few, or the scores of unemployed, Tunisia's youth are dreaming of a future far from their country of birth. End Summary.

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Where Have All the Good Jobs Gone?  
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12. (C) Tunisia's official unemployment rate of 14.1 percent is already high, but a recent World Bank study on youth employment revealed that nearly 40 percent of university graduates remain unemployed 18 months after graduation. The unemployment rate for students with masters' degrees tops out at 50 percent, reflecting the extreme disconnect in labor market supply and demand. Financial consultant Ezzeddine Saidane lamented that young Tunisians think they are doing themselves a service by pursuing higher education, but in fact, they are even less likely to get a job.

13. (C) Unemployment among young graduates has even spurred the organic development of an independent union for unemployed graduates, which now has branches throughout the country. (Note: This group has not been recognized by the GOT, which controls all new associations and unions through a registration process.) Rising prices have only exacerbated frustration over unemployment, contributing to protests in the mining region of Gafsa (reftel). Even those young graduates lucky enough to find a job may not find what they are looking for. Stories abound of university graduates stuck doing odd jobs, even working as nannies, because they are unable to find anything better.

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14. (C) Frustrated by lack of employment opportunities and low wages, many young Tunisians hope to move abroad for study and work. The 2000 national survey on youth revealed that 41 percent of Tunisian young people hope to migrate. Among one group of Econoff's Tunisian friends, four out of seven have left Tunisia in the past year and two of the remaining three are considering the possibility. Mehdi, 27, who is considering moving to France, explained that "It's not just about the money, it's about opportunities." Fares, 27, moved to Spain to study for a Master's degree in architecture and has no plans to return Tunisia. Zied, 27, left his job at Price Waterhouse Coopers in Tunis for a higher paying finance job in Dubai. Slim, also 27, found a higher paying engineering job in Paris and Skander, 31, moved to Paris to complete his studies. Faycal Lakhoua, Professor of Economics and former Ambassador to Brussels, exclaimed that the unemployment rate would be even higher if so many young Tunisians were not leaving the country to study and work abroad. "Those are the cream of the crop," he said, "and they are not coming back." Saidane stated, "I would go abroad too if I weren't too old!" Saidane's two children live in France and Germany.

Groundhog Day All Over Again

15. (C) Although praised for its stability, this stability feels like stagnation to many young people. Tunisia's high

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unemployment rate among young graduates pushes many to consider moving abroad, but it is hardly the only reason. "There is nothing happening here," Mehdi complained. "It's the same thing all the time nothing changes," Adly added. Cultural and social activities are few and far between, even in Tunis, with soccer, cafes and now Facebook taking on inordinate importance. As Hedi, 27 years old and working for ExxonMobil Tunisia, put it, "I want culture, things to do... information." Tunisia's upper middle class while away their hours at one of the handful of Tunis' see-and-be-seen bars, the working class and unemployed can be seen sitting idly at one of the numerous roadside cafes. The monotony of daily life in Tunisia is palpable.

Living in the Moment

16. (C) Young Tunisians are hardly the only segment of the population caught up in a growing consumer culture, but they are among the most active participants. Economic Professor Marouane Abbassi complained that Tunisian youth are only focused on buying the newest cell phones, clothes and cars. "When I was their age," he said, "I was saving to buy a home!" Mehdi, who works at HR Access, makes 1,200 dinars a month, but recently took out a loan to purchase a new 20,000 (US \$17,200) dinar car. Adly, 26, works for his father's architecture firm and like most of his friends continues to live at home. Adly recently spent over one thousand dinars (US \$860) -- roughly one month's salary -- on a new iPhone.

17. (SBU) While a youthful predilection for purchasing high value consumer goods is not the worst thing to happen to Tunisian society, it reflects a more general failure to plan for the future. Indeed, when Tunisia's youth actually discuss their future, that future is often not in Tunisia. Very few Tunisian youth, even those with "good" jobs, can afford to move out of their family home, much less think about purchasing a home. The average age for marriage has also gotten later and later, with many Tunisians waiting until their thirties. As Mehdi explained, "I can't afford to move out. I'm barely supporting myself. How could I get

married?" While this trend generally tracks with the average marriage age in many Western countries, it represents a significant shift in Tunisian culture.

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By Whatever Means  
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18. (SBU) When even the lucky few with jobs with multinationals are eager for an exit, illegal emigration is an attractive option for the numerous jobless Tunisians. According to the 2005 survey on youth, 15 percent of Tunisian youth are prepared to emigrate illegally. The GOT is eager to downplay illegal emigration, but there are numerous anecdotes of Tunisians, particularly young Tunisian men, trying to stow away on cargo ships or take their chances on flimsy vessels to Italy. 40 percent of the survey takers cite the absence of future prospects in Tunisia as the primary motivation for illegal migration, with the number reaching 60 percent for young people in the Tunis area. One Tunisian farmer recounted going to the police station with one of his employees to pick up the employee's son after he had been caught trying to stow away on a ship. Upon being released the son admonished them for coming to get him, telling them "I'm just going to try again as soon as we get out of here."

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A Group Apart  
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19. (C) According to the latest survey conducted on youth participation, only one out of five have participated in any type of volunteer activity and only one out of four has voted. Political apathy among youth is not a phenomenon limited to Tunisia, and certainly, Tunisian civil society participation remains limited regardless of age. Yet, the dearth of anyone below the age of forty in most governmental or non-governmental organization is striking. Even groups such as the Center for Young Business Leaders and Junior Chamber International are led by Tunisians in their forties. Mehdi bluntly stated, reflecting the views of many young Tunisians, "I don't care about Tunisia or its politics." With so many young people eager to leave, their political

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apathy is not surprising.

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Words Without Actions  
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10. (SBU) The GOT is aware that it has a problem with disaffected youth. To help address the issue, the government declared the year 2008 "The Year of Dialogue with Youth," promising nationwide forums to exchange ideas and establish common ground between older generations and the Tunisian youth. Sadok Chaabane, who chairs the Economic and Social Council, and who previously served as Minister for Higher Education, was appointed by President Ben Ali earlier this year as head of the National Commission for Youth Dialogue. In an interview with Afrique Magazine, Chaabane touted the success of the commission in gathering 179,000 young Tunisians in 30- to 40-person group discussions that took place across the country between March and June this year. "It's the goal of President Ben Ali" to reach all young Tunisians in this movement, Chaabane said. The Commission is currently putting the ideas and suggestions from these forums together in a national "Youth Pact," the first draft of which was released in early July. The pact identifies the shared values of Tunisian youth, such as the importance of national identity, but it does not suggest any goals or solutions to combat youth concerns about unemployment, health care and other issues.

¶11. (C) Tunisian youth appear increasingly both uninvolved and uninterested in their country. As they see it, their futures are elsewhere. Yet, what does Tunisia's future hold if there is no one left to lead it? The situation is worrisome, and not only for the stewardship of the country. They say that idle hands are the devil's playground and Tunisia has a lot of idle hands. Youth discontent over the lack of socioeconomic opportunity and domestic political repression not only spurs migration, but also creates fertile ground for the spread of violent extremist ideologies. Compared to Morocco and Algeria, Tunisia has had fewer terrorist attacks within its borders, but the country has bred its share of foreign fighters. Not all Tunisian terrorists emerged from the pool of unemployed, disaffected youth. In fact, many had jobs and/or the opportunity to find them in Europe. Even so, the GOT doesn't want to tempt fate by letting this problem fester. Unfortunately, however, while the GOT has attempted to address youth unemployment and open a dialogue with its young people, it has done so in typical fashion -- with a lot of speeches and little meaningful participation and dialogue. A recently televised debate on youth featured only participants in their sixties. If the GOT wants to engage youth on the future of the country, it is going to have to find a better way bring them into the process of finding solutions to the problems that underlie their sense of alienation. End Comment.

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